

Statement of  
The Honorable Elijah Cummings  
Hearing On  
“Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety”  
April 25, 2007

Today, the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation convenes to examine fishing vessel safety in the United States. Commercial fishing is – according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics – the most hazardous occupation in the country, so it is important that the Subcommittee examine the role the federal government should play in enhancing safety for those who spend their lives at sea harvesting fish and seafood for both the American and world markets.

Tragically, fatal injuries among fishermen and women increased 50 percent during the period from 2002 to 2005 while fatal injuries among all U.S. workers increased by only three percent during that same period.

The fatal occupational injury rate was 140 fatalities per 100,000 fishers, more than 28 times the average rate for all industries. Further, according to a recent Coast Guard analysis, an average of 127 fishing vessels were lost, and 58 fishers were killed each year during the period 1994 to 2004.

Fishermen and women have been an important part of the American economy since the first settlers landed on the shores of Virginia and Massachusetts – and commercial fishing still sustains thousands of families and contributes billions of dollars to our economy.

But, when commercial fishing turns deadly and, tragically, it often does, families are torn apart by the loss of husbands, wives, sons, and daughters. Six years ago, 15 families experienced such terrible losses when the fishing vessel *ARCTIC ROSE* sank in the Bearing Sea in what was the worst fishing vessel casualty since 1951.

For years, Congress required that fishing vessels be equipped with life-jackets but little else -- which is a bit like asking airline passengers to make sure to pack their parachutes before boarding but not requiring seat belts or emergency exits or fire suppression systems on planes.

In 1988, Congress passed the *Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Safety Act*, which required that commercial fishing vessels carry more modern life-saving equipment. Today, however, there are still no design, construction, maintenance or operating standards for commercial fishing vessels.

Therefore, we will hear the testimony of witnesses who will share with us their experiences under existing statutes, and, most importantly, help point us in directions that can prevent casualties from occurring on fishing vessels, enable crews on fishing vessels to respond quickly and appropriately to on-board emergencies, and maximize lives saved in the event an accident does occur.

It is my hope that the Subcommittee will gain a greater appreciation of this most hazardous occupation and will identify specific actions that can be taken to protect the lives of those who make a living from the sea.